

Environmental Knowledge, Public Awareness and Political Decision-Making: Concurring Perception and Action Parameters

Klaus Schleicher

University of Hamburg, Germany

Goal and Scope . Effective action towards sustainable development demands considering that politics, market forces and mass media have rather short term interests, and that changes in scientific paradigms and educational structures occur at a medium term pace, while cultural traditions and values, as well as climate problems, develop at long term intervals. Thus competing spatial and time parameters have to be interrelated. Problems and next steps are discussed from an European basis, because there environmental law is being enforced by sanctions for the first time, and because Europe is on the way towards transnational structures in spite of its wide spectrum of cultures, economic standards and diversified landscapes.

Methods . The increasing development of new methods that incorporate natural science approaches to achieve a better understanding of complementary social dimensions, and other methods that utilize interdisciplinary concepts, illustrates that an intergenerational and intercultural sustainable future depends on changes in learning attitudes and cultural values, as well as democratic and political structures. In the face of complex risk factors, as for example from biotechnology, and in the face of fundamental decisions, such as value changes, better communication between science, politics, societies and citizens is needed. The more intensive and the earlier such a discourse begins, the sooner society becomes ready to participate in environmental decision making, and this in spite of tensions between local and global demands, short and long term considerations, competition and cooperation, or concrete life experience and expanding abstract knowledge.

Results and Conclusion In the future we will have to cope with public information, education and participation deficits on the one hand, and with scientific specialization and institutional traditions on the other. We must also recognize the widening gap between international planning, democratic representation and local participation. Thus more attention should be given to public concern and education, since science-driven/knowledge-based societies as well as complex ecological systems demand higher levels of competency. It will be outlined how education at various levels followed and accompanied scientific change. In the future however we will not only have to mediate between the learners' potential and institutional knowledge, but also between social awareness and political decision making, as well as between civil participation and transnational regulations. Conceptual and didactic handicaps will be illustrated. On the other hand, the increasing importance of corporate governance will be discussed, since inter-disciplinary research, inter-ministerial planning and inter-national agreements are often insufficient, for they have little contact with the people and cultures, and consequently little legitimacy. Examples are given as to why consensus building strategies are necessary and need to involve and engage different political levels, regions, actors and especially the public, so that decision making becomes more transparent, accountable, coherent, acceptable and effective. All in all, sustainability demands that humanity learns about itself.